

## **CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

Updated January 13, 2010 (first published November 25, 2004) (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

From time to time I receive questions about church membership such as the following:

“I’ve tried to do some research about working in a church before being a member and I have heard a lot about ‘you should be a member before working in the church,’ so I was just wanting to know if you could help me to understand where the Bible talks about that topic.”

### **BROTHER CLOUD’S REPLY ABOUT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

The doctrine of church membership is found in the book of Acts, beginning with the first church.

In Acts 1:15 we see that the names of the members were kept.

In Acts 2:41, those that were saved on the day of Pentecost were “added unto them.” This means that they were added to those already mentioned in verse 15.

Those who were saved and baptized were added to the church. That is church membership.

#### **There are four reasons why we need church membership:**

Church membership is a matter of practicality, like many other things in the assembly. If a church does not have membership, how can it know who is in the church and who is out?

***First, we need church membership because each church is a body and family.***

In the New Testament all believers are a part of Christ and the family of God but each church is independent and has its own business. See Acts 14:21-23. Here the first missionaries set the example by establishing each church with its own leaders and functionality. We see the same thing in Revelation 1:4, where each church was addressed individually. In Revelation 1:12-13 Jesus is standing in the midst of the churches, which are signified by the golden candlesticks. In the Old Testament there was one candlestick in the tabernacle, but in the New Testament dispensation there are many candlesticks, as each church is a light. See 1 Timothy 3:15, which says the church is “the house of God,

which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” In the context this refers to the church that has pastors and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-14).

In the New Testament each separate church is a spiritual body and has its own members. “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Cor. 12:26-27).

We have the example of Phebe in Romans 16:1. “I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.” She was on business in Rome but she was a servant of one particular church. This is the biblical pattern.

***Second, we need church membership for unity.***

The Bible requires that the believers have one mind in doctrine and practice. “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). For this reason our church has a lengthy statement of faith and we require every member to agree with it, whether he is joining by statement of faith and baptism or from another church.

***Third, we need church membership for discipline.***

“But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:11-13).

This passage deals with church discipline, and in verse 12 we see that there are those who are in the church and those who are without. How can a congregation know who is in and who is out, who is under discipline and who is not, unless it has some form of church membership? As we have stated, it is a matter of practicality. Parents can’t discipline other people’s children, and churches can’t discipline those who are not a part of its own family. Also verse 11 says those under discipline cannot eat, which refers both to personal fellowship and to the Lord’s Supper. The church has the obligation before God to exercise discipline over its members and those who are under discipline cannot partake of Communion. Thus there must be a way for the church to know who is a part of the family and who is outside.

#### ***Fourth, we need church membership for authority.***

Hebrews 13:7 and 17 say, “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. ... Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”

According to these passages each believer is to be under the authority of church rulers, and we know from other New Testament Scriptures that these rulers are pastors and elders. How can the church leaders know whom they are ruling if there is no membership? Do pastors have the rule over anyone who visits the church? Of course not, so there must be some sort of membership, which involves a standard by which the church accepts members and a commitment on the part of those seeking membership.

#### **A matter of liberty**

That a church needs to maintain membership is clear from Scripture, but each church is free to decide how to handle this matter. It is like the church services. The Bible does not spell out how many services the church is to have or how they are to be conducted. These things are matters of practicality that each church determines before the Lord with the objective of obeying the Great Commission and the New Testament faith.

And one church cannot judge another church in this matter, because it is a matter of liberty before God. It falls under the category of the things spoken of in Romans 14.

“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.”

When Paul says in this passage, “Who are thou that judgest another man's servant,” he is talking about judging in matters on which the Bible is silent. The examples that he gave make this clear. He mentioned dietary matters and holy days. In both of these cases, there is no rule in the New Testament. There is no one Christian diet (as there was in the Mosaic dispensation) and there are no holy days in the sense that were required under the Old Covenant. In such matters each believer and each congregation is at liberty to make

their own decisions. Since the Bible does not spell out the issue of church membership, this means that each congregation is at liberty to determine how to conduct this matter, and one church cannot make a law for others.

Church membership can be as formal or informal as each congregation sees fit. There are some general guidelines for these things in Scripture, as we have seen, but the details are not spelled out.

Thus each church makes its own determination in submission to the Holy Spirit and in conformity to the principles of Scripture and in light of its particular situation.

## **Conclusion**

Since God says we should obey them that have the rule over us (Heb. 13:7, 17), this means that when the church leaders determine a direction from the Lord in these issues, the members follow, unless the leaders are clearly moving contrary to the Bible.

In light of these Bible truths it is obvious that absenting oneself from and neglecting the church is unscriptural. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:25).

It is also obvious that drifting from church to church is unscriptural. As we have seen, the biblical pattern is for a believer to be committed to one particular church. Phebe was a servant of the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1).

Further, the concept of "inactive membership" is unscriptural. A 1997 study in the Southern Baptist Convention found that out of 16 million "members" only 33% show up on Sunday morning and only 12% participate in anything else (*Founder's Journal*, Feb. 7, 1999). Church members that do not actively participate in the life and work of the church are not members in any scriptural sense. The members of the first church did not merely profess Christ and sign a membership card. They "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

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